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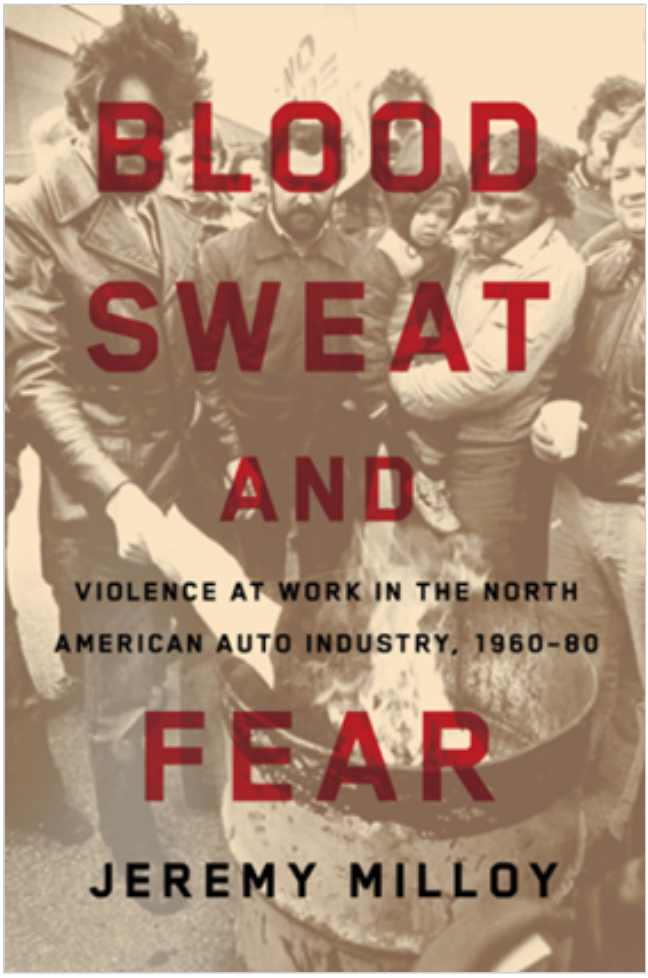
Manufacturing violence at the border

Blood, Sweat, and Fear: Violence at Work in the North American Auto Industry, 1960–80. By Jeremy Milloy. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press by arrangement with UBC Press, 2017, 171 pp., $28.89 hardback and paperback.



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In *Blood, Sweat, and Fear: Violence at Work in the North American Auto Industry, 1960–80*, author Jeremy Milloy uses employee diaries, police reports, union documentation, interviews, and newspaper stories to reveal "a historical relationship between structural violence and individual violence in the workplace setting, as well as how levels of violence changed over time because of changes in the labour process." Although the author does a good job of introducing the overarching theme of workplace violence and the many ways in which it was perpetrated (e.g., by management against workers, by workers against management, or among workers themselves), his analysis of the various circumstances and motivations of the perpetrators is not always clear. For example, Milloy jumps rapidly from discussing United Automobile Workers (UAW) organizations in the United States to describing UAW counterparts in Canada, often without drawing a clear demarcation between the two or without announcing which union is discussed. Further, while the book's goal is to document an attitudinal shift in the labor force—namely, how the powerlessness caused by violence accounts for "why we stopped fearing class war and began fearing the lone gunman"—the evidence for that shift is largely anecdotal and sometimes lost in the storytelling.

According to Milloy, unions in the United States were strong in the first half of the 20th century, but they began to weaken in the 1960s and 1970s, mostly because of management decisions and actions. The dynamics of U.S. auto-factory employment layered many problems, usually beginning with unsafe working conditions and intensive productivity demands and often ending in individual

violence. Workplace safety hazards and ever-increasing production quotas played a large role in the rise of injury rates throughout the period. The weakening of unions, combined with other social problems such as racism, sexism, and substance abuse (all exacerbated by the decline in, and fracturing of, collective bargaining), led to more workplace violence. This violence took various forms, including physical confrontations among production workers, between production workers and their supervisors, and among workers of different races or sexes.

The book first lays out very bleak statistics both on changing rates of accidents and incidents at automotive factories and on changing workforce demographics at the time. When White automotive workers in Detroit went on strike to demand better safety and pay, Black workers were hired at lower wages to fill their dangerous jobs. This led to management actively pitting Black and White workers against each other and to union members reacting in often violent and racist ways to their new coworkers. Because of racial tensions in the UAW, which was frequently hostile to non-White workers, some African American workers in Detroit formed the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM). Although racial issues predated these developments, Chrysler executives exploited the heightened tensions in order to undermine the power of both the UAW and DRUM. Instead of collectively demanding better pay and safer work conditions, Black workers often fought against UAW protections for their members because these protections tended to keep African Americans in the least skilled and most dangerous factory work. Since competing unions did not exist across the U.S. northern border, the Canadian UAW was more effective in negotiating with management, securing worker protections for both Black and White members.

To illustrate the effects of unions on workplace violence and injury levels, Milloy examines the differences between two UAW branches in locations with Chrysler plants: one in Detroit and another just across the northern border, in Detroit's sister city of Windsor, Canada. Given cross-country variations in union power and protections, as well as changing dynamics of unionization in the United States at the time, this comparison represents a natural experiment aiming to show the dampening effects of strong unions on the incidence of violence and injury in the workplace. Although Milloy notes that violence did occur on the Canadian side of the border, he observes that the racial and economic issues there were less pronounced than those in the United States. A more powerful union in Canada managed to secure stronger worker protections, largely mitigating the type of worker discontent that could have bubbled over into individual violence. In his own words,

> "…violence was not an aberration or a freak occurrence but an understood part of the industrial culture and working-class manhood at Windsor Chrysler. However, different racial dynamics, the greater economic stability of Windsor Chrysler plants, a more effective union, and a safer city limited the atomization and brutalization of workers and thus limited the incidence of individual violence compared with the crisis of violence that exploded in Detroit Chrysler plants."

After addressing factory violence in general, the palliative effects of inclusive union negotiations with management, and the individual violence that often results from denying protections to certain groups of workers, Milloy turns to examining changes in the perceptions of workplace violence in the courts and the press. He addresses this shift in the context of the civil rights movement and the decline in union strength in the 1970s, recounting three shooting-incident court cases, each characterized by very different legal defenses.

In the first case, which involved Black autoworker James Johnson, who shot two foremen and a coworker in 1970, the media reactions showed that "many recognized that individual violence at work was an outgrowth of the brutal processes of Detroit factory labour and the racial and other hierarchies that were central to how this labour was

organized and carried out." Johnson was declared temporarily insane—allegedly because of unfair and dangerous workplace conditions exacerbated by racism—and was eventually awarded worker's compensation from Chrysler.

The second case, in 1973, dealt more directly with conflict within the UAW. A Black union leader, David Mundy, shot a skilled-trade worker who had violently objected to a contract deal between Ford Motor Company and the UAW. The deal allowed unskilled employees to work overtime in skilled-labor positions. Unlike Johnson, Mundy was politically involved and held considerable power in the UAW. He could not easily be thought of as a highly stressed and vulnerable employee subjected to aggression by a leadership with no regard for his safety or security. Instead, he became violent after being squeezed by both management and the rank and file, a situation suggesting that "with no simple narrative of worker versus company to present, Mundy's action was seen as symptomatic of workplace conflict, not produced by it." Essentially, Mundy had too much power to be considered a victim of his circumstances, although these circumstances had implications for violence and racial tensions similar to those of Johnson.

The third case is that of Black autoworker Clarence Talbot, who, after being fired in 1977, shot and killed Charlie Brooks, the president of a local union who was beloved and widely seen as fair. Talbot was described as an illiterate bully who grew up in a bad neighborhood. Although it was clear that Talbot had been the victim of racial animus from a young age, very few of those talking or writing about the shooting at the time had sympathy for his plight. Talbot's lawyer refused to let him testify and did not address racism during the trial. Instead, his defense claimed medical, not circumstantial, insanity, a strategy that confined him to a mental hospital (instead of a prison) and did not require any changes in the practices of the UAW or the automotive factories. Two civil rights lawyers, Charles Roach and Michael Smith, tried to investigate Talbot's experience with racial inequities and to provide their findings to his defense team. However, they ended up being investigated themselves, with Talbot's court-appointed lawyer accusing them of trying to steal his client. These three cases illustrate a shift in public perceptions about workplace violence—from seeing Johnson's insanity as a consequence of systemic racism to constructing the image of the lone gunman fighting demons beyond the context of the workplace.

Milloy's book shows that "violence was a crucial variable in labour processes and workplace cultures of the automotive industry." Furthermore, there was a change over time in who was perpetrating the violence, who was its target (managers, workers, or union officials), and what factors were responsible for it (systemic inequities and dangers or individual grievances). Although violence was partly driven by systemic causes, the blame for it gradually shifted from the collective to the individual, with management seeking to dilute union power and to pit individuals against one another. While violence was present in both U.S. and Canadian factories, its causes, levels, and outcomes differed across the border. In both countries, however, there was a shift toward individual blame over time. I recommend Milloy's book to anyone trying to understand the dynamics of increasing workplace violence, the historical decline in collective bargaining power, the effects of racism and class divides on workplace conflict, and the systemic issues created by stifling the negotiating power of labor.